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Isabelle Diepstraten



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This book focuses on 'Which and how do young people in Europe succeed in actively constructing their own biography in relation to the settings in which their transitions take place? How can participation contribute to this?' These questions are seen from the perspective of the (changing) relationship between agency and structure. Different research perspectives are linked to explore the interaction between individual agency or coping strategies and structural characteristics of four types of transition regimes in Europe: the universalistic transition regime in Nordic countries, the liberal system of Anglo-Saxon countries, the employment-centered regime in Western European countries and the sub-protective regime of Southern European countries. In each Eastern European country a different mix of earlier mentioned regimes can be found.

Young people were asked to reconstruct their own biography and to reflect on their transitional experiences. A group of 286 so-called 'disengaged' young people was found within projects that address young people in their transition to work. A contrasting group of 79 so-called 'trendsetters' was found through 'snowballing' techniques. Several types of life course patterns and several types of biographical orientations are found. The stagnant pattern (followed by the institutional repaired and downward pattern) was the most common category and was mainly composed of 'disengaged' youngsters from low socio-economic backgrounds. The alternative pattern refers to a successful, but not standard pathway and was primarily composed of a generally older group from middle and higher backgrounds: 'trendsetters', but also some 'disengaged' people who had experienced support from participatory projects. Material orientations to work, stressing the importance of making money, and uncertain orientations are more common in the 'disengaged' group. They experience a discrepancy between subjective life perspectives and experiences with reality. Especially experiences with institutions of the transition system seem de-motivating and leading to processes of alienation. In the 'trendsetter' group the combination of an alternative

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pattern and expressive work orientation, directed at challenging work and personal fulfillment, is most frequent. Intrinsic motivation is high, because an individual goal can be realised in an individualised trajectory, due to favourable social networks (family, self-developed or empowering projects that compensate for a lack of own networks) that provide resources and that support experiments that strengthen self-confidence. Those networks deliver support from close friends, but are also heterogeneous, open to contact with different people and therefore open to different resources for coping and different role models. 'Trendsetters' continuously search meaningful learning experiences, by communicating with all kinds of people, by doing, by trial and error. They use formal education in a self-determined way and as long as they think it is useful. Especially informal learning experiences in self-developed networks seem relevant. 'Trendsetters' are well aware of the importance of their network and reflect on their learning experiences to combine them in a biographically meaningful career. They do not only learn 'life wide', but also want to learn life long, although their future plans are open to on-going review.

The way 'trendsetters' learn is comparable with the criteria of successful projects. By providing a context of participatory learning, the projects offer 'disadvantaged' young people an opportunity to appropriate the form and content of their own learning, and to re-integrate their learning within a wider biographical context. The following success criteria are identified. The voluntary choice to attend the project and to 'use' the project for individual needs, outcomes that are open and therefore can be seen as 'their own achievement'. Also important is making resources available in spaces that can be shaped according to own needs and that are connected with the wider community and therefore can be used for 'self-presentation' and building own social networks. A share of responsibility is another factor, just as trusting relationships and the function of project workers as sounding board and 'significant others'. A final cluster of criteria is subsumed as recognition: seeing young people as autonomous persons with a whole range of needs, focusing on strengths and offering young people visibility. Overlooking the success criteria, crucial is 'getting in contact with meaningfulness' by experiments, meeting significant others and reflection upon personal and structural limits.

However, the success of projects also depends on less manipulable criteria, like labour market opportunities, funding and the project workers as persons. Moreover, the kind of projects that are carried out in countries is interwoven with the type of transition regime in a country.

The main conclusion is that social integration of young people requires both a welfare approach and a civil society approach of participation. A model of Integrated Transition Policies is recommended. Boundaries between education, welfare, labour market and youth policies must be permeable in order to serve individually meaningful life perspectives and sustainable social inclusion.